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ABSTRACT

Suggesting that the ability to identify words depends as much on contextual information available when one is reading for meaning as on decoding skills, this paper challenges traditional, mechanistic skills approaches to reading instruction. In addition, it contends that comprehending (relating written material to what one already knows) is a complex constructive process barely touched by traditional instruction in comprehension skills. (Author/FL)

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# "READING AS UNDERSTANDING - OR BEYOND THE WAY OF ALL FLESCH!" *

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SYNOPSIS.

The paper challenges traditional, mechanistic "skills" approaches to reading instruction, suggesting that the ability to identify words depends as much on contextual information available when one is reading for meaning as on so-called "decoding skills". Similarly, it is suggested that comprehending (relating written material to what one already knows) is a complex constructive process barely touched by traditional instruction in comprehension skills.

## READING AS DECODING FROM PRINT TO SOUND.

At one end of a spectrum of views about reading and the reading process we find notions of reading which deliberately reject understanding. Flesch (1955) provides one example:

> "Many years ago, when I was about fifteen, I took a semester's course in Czech; I have since forgotten everything about the language itself, but I still remember how the letters are pronounced, plus the simple rule that all words have the accent on the first syllable. Armed with this knowledge, I once surprised a native of Prague by reading aloud from a Czech newspaper. 'Oh, you know Czech?' he asked. 'No, I don't understand a word of it,' I answered. 'I can only read it'."

A somewhat similar view comes from Walcutt who claims:

> "In the earliest stages of learning to read there is very little need for thinking or reasoning on the part of the child. What he needs is practice in mastering a decoding skill, and the thinking will come along quite some time later."
>
> (Quoted in Goddard, 1974).

One imagines that what Walcutt means by "a decoding skill" is the business of learning the complex correspondences between letter patterns and the

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sounds which they can represent. Flesch (1955) quite clearly suggests that children can learn to read with the aid of nothing more than lists of unrelated words of the same graphic pattern.

The outcome of views such as these is a plethora of "decoding-skills" programmes and materials which purport to teach reading, or at least "basic" aspects of it, by teaching children to induce letter/sound relationships from letters and words viewed in isolation.

Approaches such as these can lead children to identify the sounds appropriate for certain regular graphic patterns, and it is clear that this ability can be useful when they are faced with reading aloud graphically "regular" sentences such as:

FAT DAN CAN FAN NAN ON THE CAN.

The problem, however, is that at some stage, children have to learn that "decoding" from graphic patterns to sound is not only insufficient for the identification of a wider range of words but also it is possibly the least efficient, and most demanding means of word identification when one is reading the language of normal books.

BEYOND DECODING.

The insufficiency of decoding from graphic pattern to sound has been widely documented. Smith (1971), for example, draws attention to problems of deciding syllable boundaries in pairs such as FATHER/FAT HEAD and TELEPHONE/SHEPHERD. It is obvious, too, that phonic generalizations break down once one progresses beyond monosyllabic words and a few simple two-syllable words such as LEMON. For example, symbol/sound correspondences cannot offer a complete guide with words such as DENY, DESTROY, PRESENT (verb) etc., where stress rules reduce vowel sounds in a way that is not easily predicted. Phonic generalizations also fail to account for sound changes which are not represented by spelling, as in MEDICAL/MEDICINE; CRITIC/CRITICIZE etc., (see Chomsky, 1970). Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the insufficiency of decoding from symbols to sound comes from listening to the oral reading of children who try to "sound out" each letter or cluster of letters. They are clearly handicapped readers who have not learned that using letter/sound correspondences works only some of the time, and that other sources of information are available to help them identify words.

The inefficiency of relying only on decoding from letter patterns to sound becomes obvious when one realizes that most children, often despite their instruction, learn to guess at words not only on the basis of their graphic components but also on the basis of their relation to other words in the flow of language and their relation to the overall meaning which the reader is constructing from the text being read (see Clay, 1969; Weber, 1970; Goodman & Burke, 1973; Rode, 1974; Neville & Pugh, 1977).

The importance of context in helping readers to make decisions about words is apparent if one thinks about what is required to fill in the gaps in example (1) below, and what is needed to ignore the spelling distortions, and make sense of example (2).

(1) Wh-n h-s s-rt-r -p-n-d th- b--k, sh-
f--nd p-nc-l m-rks -ll -v-r th- p-g-s.
(From Artley, 1977).

(2) Altohugh the techaing of soiacl and phsycial scineces inovlevs far more than a prenestation of fcats, it is true that much deifinte maetrial must be prseneted to the puipls in the coruse of tehir edcuation in tehse sujtects. (From Watson 1976).

Just how important context-support is, can also be demonstrated if one tries to read aloud the following sentences while attempting to make sense of them:

1. INN THEIR WEE SORE HYMN MEAT HIS AREN'T.
2. ON IT'S WRITE SIGHED THE READ BE HAS KNOW HARE.
3. ITS KNOT THE TIED EYE FLEA; ITS THE SEE HEIR AT KNIGHT.
4. EYE SEA THE HOAR HAS SCENE THE ERA OF HER WEIGHS.
5. THE NONE TOLLED HYMN SHE HAD SCENE AND HERD A PEAR OF BEAR FEAT IN THE HAUL.
6. PAS D'ELLE YEUX RHONE QUE NOUS.

When one forces oneself to attend to the sound value of the graphic pattern rather than the idea which is normally associated with that graphic pattern, this task becomes easier; but, even then, one has to imagine a sentence context - a meaningful statement - into which each of the words will fit. The task points up a generalization that applies to children learning to read. WHEN YOU CAN GUESS AT THE WHOLE - i.e., WHEN YOU CAN PUT IT ALL TOGETHER - WORKING OUT THE PARTS, (i.e., IDENTIFYING THE WORDS) BECOMES EASY.

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De-coding skills instruction which directs children's attention to grapho-phonic patterns or words in isolation may, therefore, prevent their using the wider sources of information which are available to them when they read continuous texts. For example, Goodman (1965) showed that, when provided with written language context, young readers could read at least two thirds of the words that they were unable to read if those same words were provided in isolated lists.

An over-emphasis on decoding skills taught in isolation also may suggest to children that "sounding out" is the sole strategy to use with words that look unfamiliar, and that what is important is saying aloud the words on the page without any active response on their part. Such an emphasis may hinder the realization that to read with understanding one has to relate the words on the page to what one already knows.

UNDERSTANDING AS THE MEANS.

Thus one is led to a view of reading that goes beyond simple decoding from graphic patterns to sound. Such a view suggests that it is the attempt to make meaning - to understand the writer's message - that is at the heart of the reading process. In fact, the use of informed predictions about the ideas and language forms that one is likely to encounter is what makes efficient word identification possible. Comprehension or understanding is not, therefore, simply a result of reading; it is also a means of reading. One implication for teaching is that if we can encourage children to read for meaning rather than for isolated language forms, they will learn to read more easily. (For examples of "meaning-emphasis methods", see Dilena 1977).

COMPREHENSION SKILLS.

The need for meaning-emphasis approaches suggests that the traditional division of reading instruction into "decoding skills" and "comprehension skills" may be unwise. Teachers who believe that reading in the early stages can be acquired without understanding and who present a strict diet of "decoding skills", may prevent their children from developing the attitudes and strategies which enable them to interact meaningfully with print. Thus the failure of children who "read the words but don't know what it means" (Cunningham, 1975) can be attributed to the teaching rather than to the children.

Criticisms made of mechanistic approaches to reading instruction (see Morris 1963) can also be levelled at traditional approaches to "comprehension skills". The danger is that, in ignoring the importance of purpose in reading, skills instruction may inadvertedly direct attention away from the real business of responsive reading. As Watson (1976) suggests, many of the questions in comprehension exercises seem to encourage bad reading habits by drawing attention to the least significant features of a passage. He points out that a good reader is involved in a continuous process of selecting what is important to bear in mind and relegating other details as not important enough to be kept in the forefront of the mind.

Dijk (1975), for example, found that seventeen year old high school students were able to describe the main character and purpose in most stories, but were able to recall less than thirty per cent of the "facts" of the story. They deleted references to descriptions of locations, emotional states, time, atmosphere, weather, 'normal events', adverbs and adjectives. Dijk also suggests that where descriptive material "dominates" the "action" in the story, the child's task of isolating central themes or events is impossible.

Yet many of the questions in comprehension exercises stress these unimportant details. As Watson says, the paying of attention to isolated words or phrases tends to fragment the reader's response, to inhibit communication between writer and reader and to constantly direct the child's attention away from his own interpretation of the writer's words to the interpretation of the question setter.

An alternative to such traditional questions is proposed by Thorne (1972) who suggests that we should ask questions which require children to <u>use</u> details rather than recall them. She has in mind questions which expect children to recognize the author's implied meanings and to base inferences on what he has said. She also suggests questions which expect children to relate the author's ideas to their own experience and to form judgements about their validity - questions which ask them to <u>comment on</u> what was written.

Such an approach implies that there is little point in separating comprehension skills instruction into compartments such as "literal", "interpretive", "critical", and "creative" comprehension as is often advocated. These, after all, are only categories of comprehension <u>questions</u>

which require readers to show that they can perform certain mental operations. How far removed from a personal response to the text some of these operations are can be seen in tests conducted by Bormuth et al (1969). In their tests, the most difficult task appears to be that of determining the meaning of the test questions. For example, the following are suggested as "intersentence syntax questions":

| | |
|---|---|
| Original Sentences: | THE BOY FELL OFF THE STEED. HE FRACTURED HIS ARM. |
| Rote: | WHAT CAUSED THE FRACTURING OF THE BOY'S ARM? |
| Reversal: | WHAT DID THE BOY'S FALL FROM THE STEED CAUSE? |
| Semantic Substitute: | WHAT CAUSED THE BREAKING OF THE BOY'S ARM? |
| Compound: | WHAT WAS THE BREAKING OF THE BOY'S ARM CAUSED BY? |

There is the problem that such 'literal' questions are no more than an elaborate test of the reader's ability to play "transformation games" which can be done with little attention to understanding. For example, 'literal' questions can be easily answered about the following.

"Teep was the norst fap to pam the ausp deest of Agglepap".

i.e., 1. Who was the first fap to pam the ausp deest of Agglepap?

2. What was pammed by Teep?

3. Which part of Agglepap did Teep pam?

Satisfactory answers can be given to such questions without understanding any more than the grammatical relations between the content words. How much meaning is missed is apparent when one uses a structurally identical sentence such as:

"Cook was the first man to map the east coast of Australia."

Perhaps the most important point about comprehension questions is that such 'lower order' 'literal' questions can be dealt with in the context of the much more important interpretive/critical/creative questions which Thorne suggests. If the focus is on relating what the writer has to say to what

the reader already knows, reading can be interpretive, critical and creative right from the beginning of reading instruction. If children have access to meaningful coherent texts and generate real purposes for reading, they do make inferences and can be encouraged to make the same kind of critical and creative responses that they make to spoken language. (See Stauffer 1969).

THE READER'S CONTRIBUTION.

One issue that is often overlooked in mechanistic comprehension skills programmes is that comprehension is not just a linguistic phenomenon but that, in understanding almost any text, readers are required to make considerable cognitive contributions of their own. The writer, in conveying his message, does not make every aspect of his meaning explicit in the text. The words that he uses are simply cues to concepts and relations which he assumes his readers are already aware of. The text, therefore, operates merely as a guide for readers to build up a set of meanings which will be congruent with those in the head of the writer.

Comprehension difficulties cannot therefore be attributed to just a lack of general comprehension "skills" which are common to the reading of all kinds of material. As Schiller (1973) reminds us, 'reading' is a transitive verb and we need to consider what it is that the reader is supposed to read. This means that we should consider the difficulty of concepts (the extent to which words compress whole areas of information) and the reader's experiences of the ideas presented.

In discussing the difficulty of social studies materials, Horn (1937) remarked:

> "the most important facts are the number and inherent difficulty of the concepts, the lack of pertinence to the experience and interests of the prospective reader, the author's failure to define explicitly the large ideas that the reader is to obtain, and the meagerness of treatment." (P.169).

Gray (1944), summarizing the proceedings of a conference on "Reading in relation to experience and language," observed:

> "Practically every speaker pointed out that throughout the grades and high school a common error is to assign reading selections for which pupils have inadequate backgrounds. Indeed, many of the failures in high school and college were attributed to the pupils' limited experience in the areas to which assigned readings referred." (Pp.216-17).

Perhaps the strongest recent statement of the view that difficulties in understanding texts come primarily from non-linguistic factors is expressed by Carroll (1971). In a review of more than 1200 items in the research literature on language comprehension, he concludes:

> "Language understanding depends not only on knowledge of the conventional features of the language system but also upon a large accumulation of general knowledge about the world, its peoples, history etc. As Kelly (1970) puts it, 'a massive dictionary - the sources - encyclopedia lies at the heart of human linguistic abilities."

CONSTRUCTING MEANING REPRESENTATIONS.

Acceptance of the idea that the processing of information depends critically on the information already stored in the comprehender has led, in recent years, to theory and research which deal with the way in which the comprehender uses what he already knows to construct a "meaning representation" from the cues provided in the text.

Ultimately, of course, the processing of all information, even sensory information, is interpretive, for the information that reaches us is rarely sufficient for full comprehension. Examples are provided by Wells (1976):

> "I look out of my window and receive visual information about a brown vertical column and a red rectangle with smaller rectangles within it. What I <u>see</u> is a tree and a house. I receive visual information about a shiny metal object moving past the front of the house. But what I <u>see</u> is a car being driven along the road. At the same time I receive auditory information of a loud sharp sound. I <u>hear</u> the car backfiring."

These examples are, says Wells, typical of the way in which we "go beyond the information given" (Bruner 1974), drawing upon our inner representation of past experiences of the relations between objects and events to fill out the gaps in what is immediately presented.

The significance of the internalized model of the world that we thus gradually build up on the basis of specific experiences is eloquently expressed in the Bullock Report (1975):

> "This accumulated representation is on the one hand a storehouse of past experience and on the other a body of expectations regarding what may yet happen to us. In this way we construct for ourselves a past and a future, a retrospect and a prospect; all our significant

> actions are performed within this extended field or framework, and no conscious act, however trivial, is uninfluenced by it." (P.47).

Language comprehension would seem to involve information processing of the same kind. For, even before a receiver begins to interact with either a spoken or written message, he has some perception of the communication situation and the speaker's or writer's intentions. The utterance or written message is a further source of information which must be compared with, and checked against, these expectations. As Wells suggests:

> "Comprehension is thus the result of an interactional process between the cues provided by the sender's utterance and the knowledge that the reader can bring to bear in interpreting those cues ... With no input there would be nothing to comprehend but as Britton (1974) has put it, 'No expectation; no message'."

An utterance or text, therefore, can do no more than provide cues, for the words or structures of which it is composed refer only to abstract classes of entities and relations between them. Consider for example, the newspaper headline: "TEACHERS CHIEF WARNS OF WHISKY CUT-BACK", which turned out to be a statement from the director of Teachers Whisky distilling company. Consider too, the cognitive contributions that one has to make to understand each of the following:

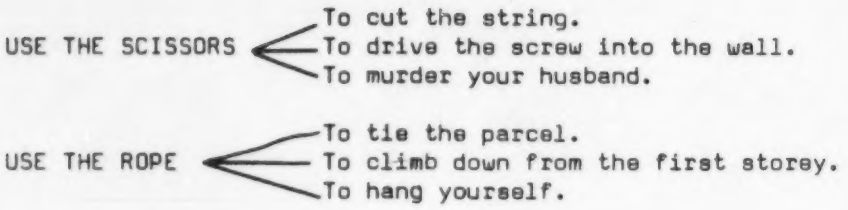
THE BOX IS IN THE PEN.
THE PEN IS IN THE BOX.

Then, there are the meanings of "RUN" which become apparent only when one can construct meaning from additional context:

THE CAR RUNS ON SOLAR ENERGY.
HE RUNS EVERY DAY TO KEEP FIT.
HE HAD TO RUN FOR HIS LIFE.
SHE HAD TO RUN TO CATCH THE BUS.
THE ROAD RUNS ROUND THE TOWN.
DON'T LET THE MOTOR RUN TOO LONG.

Similarly, the word "USE" in the following doesn't have a single meaning. The meaning has to be constructed according to the reader's experience.

USE THE CHAIR ← To reach the light bulb,
To stop them coming into the room.
To keep the carpet in place.


USE THE SCISSORS
To cut the string.
To drive the screw into the wall.
To murder your husband.
USE THE ROPE
To tie the parcel.
To climb down from the first storey.
To hang yourself.

Bransford and McCarrell (1974) sum up the kind of contribution that the reader makes by saying:

> "The semantic content of a particular linguistic message is created only as the comprehender, guided by linguistic cues, specifies conditions under which the abstract relations can be realized given his knowledge of the world. A person may therefore have knowledge of a language and yet fail to comprehend an utterance because he is unable to make the necessary cognitive contributions. And the same utterance may be understood differently as a function of the cognitive contributions that different listeners make." (P.215).

Comprehension can thus be seen as an active or constructive process, in which the receiver brings his knowledge of all the relevant information to bear on the construction of a meaning which he judges to match the meaning of the sender; but, as Bransford and McCarrell point out, the same utterance may be understood differently by different people.

Sometimes it is clear that comprehension difficulties are caused by the fact that the reader is unsure of the writer's intentions and is thus unable to construct a "schema" within which the words on the page will make sense. An extreme example is the difficulty that most adults have in making sense of the following passage:

> "Hocked gems financed our hero. Scornful laughter had tried to prevent his scheme. Bravely he persisted. "An egg, not a table typifies this unexplored planet," he said. Now three sturdy sisters sought proof. They forged along over turbulent peaks and valleys. Days became weeks as doubters spread fearful rumors about the edge. At last welcome winged creatures appeared. Momentous success was at hand." (Source Unknown).

The difficulties are usually removed when readers are provided with the title: "Christopher Columbus". Even people who were never told that Queen Isabella of Spain sold the royal jewels to finance the voyage of Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria, are, somehow, able to construct a meaningful representation.

Adults report a variety of "interim" schemas that they build while trying to construct a satisfactory one. Some create moonscapes, others desert landscapes, while some construct science fiction, Greek mythology and Macbethian "pictures".

Another illustration of the constructive or generative nature of comprehension is provided by readers' responses to the following passage from a Faulkner short story:

> "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant - a combined gardener and cook - had seen in at least ten years." (William Faulkner: "A Rose for Emily").

The 'level' or 'depth' of comprehension that is possible becomes obvious when one asks adult readers to give clear-cut answers to the following questions, none of which refers to information explicitly stated in the text:

1. Was the town large or small?
2. Was Miss Emily old?
3. Had she been wealthy?
4. Was she wealthy at death?
5. Was either she or her family important?
6. Was there any mystery about her doings?
7. Does the name 'Emily Grierson' suggest something that is not suggested by a name such as 'Jane O'Brien'?
8. Does "Miss" indicate only that she was unmarried?

While some readers are naturally unwilling to commit themselves on the evidence available, most admit to fairly definite answers once they have thought about the passage and the questions. Typically those familiar with Faulkner's writings bring many more associations, and make inferences to build up a much richer schema or meaning representation. Once again, the richness of meaning is largely determined by the contributions which the individual reader makes.

The extent to which the reader will make inferences and elaborate a schema as he reads will depend, of course, on the purpose for which he is reading. The complex set of responses that one may make to literary language such as Faulkner's is clearly not the norm. Nor is the careful reading which people do when confronted with reading test items or comprehension exercises. It seems that sophisticated readers attend to

information on the page, make inferences, and store detail, only to the extent that these activities can relate to information that they already have and to the extent that these activities answer questions which they have posed for themselves.

There is evidence that young readers can behave in much the same way when reading for their own purposes. For example, my nine year old son, given the task of writing an assignment on William Pitt the Elder, read through an encyclopedia article which dealt with complex issues about various ministries, the House of Commons, the French Wars etc., which were quite beyond his experience. Nevertheless, he assured me that he understood the article. When asked what it had been about, he confidently stated that Pitt had gone to Eton, stopped the war with France, and died of gout (he pronounced it 'goot'). Here was one young reader who had the sense and confidence to ignore what he could not relate to his own experience and to attend to, and store, what he could.

CONCLUSION.

Much of this paper has challenged traditional conceptions of reading instruction. The intention has not been to suggest that work on "decoding skills" and "comprehension skills" ought to be discarded. Obviously all children need to use the relationships between graphic patterns and sounds, and they need to be able to extract from written material key ideas and important details. My suggestion is that these abilities do not develop simply from instruction in the "mechanics" of reading.

Learning the relationships between letter patterns and sounds is not accomplished just through viewing letter patterns in isolation, and learning to read is a lot more complex than learning the sounds that letters represent. Similarly, the complex business of comprehending (or relating a writer's message to what one already knows) is not achieved just through exercises in selecting details or picking out main ideas.

While activities such as these have value, the danger is that, overzealously pursued, they may give children the idea that doing exercises is what reading is about. Our need, therefore, is not to "get back to basics" but, as a recent visitor to Australia suggested, "to move forward to fundamentals". What is most fundamental, of course, is that children learn to make an active, personal response to print. If we don't teach them to do this, we may be responsible for producing what Thorn calls, "higher illiterates".

> "The higher illiterate can absorb and repeat ideas on the printed page but he has not developed the ability to relate these ideas to the life around him. He does not engage in the kind of dialogue which will test the relevance of what he has read to his own personal experience, to the lives of those he meets or to the behaviour of individual and social groups in general. He does not know how to bring about the conscious interplay between ideas previously encountered and the content of what is being read at the moment. He does not raise the sharp questions which probe the content of reading for meaning, test it for accuracy and penetration and weigh its implications for himself and society...
>
> In short, for the higher illiterate, reading is not an invitation to reflective thought. It does not arouse an active process of relating the abstractions on the printed page to persons events and institutions of the real world: it does not lead to an internal reorganization of ideas previously received or the establishment of receptivity to other new ideas: and it does not become a seizing of the present moment to extract from past experience insights into the future." (P.83).

Remove the negatives, and one has an ideal to which one can aspire - an ideal, moreover, which can be begun to be realized from the first day that children come to school.

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